

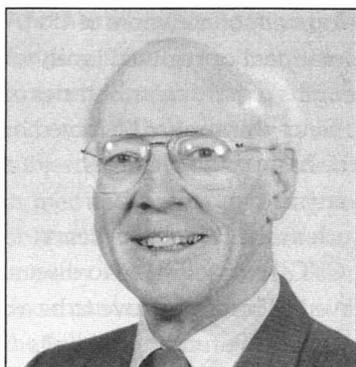
## THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLLETT

A review of the Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group (Follett Committee) Report, December 1993

*Maurice B Line*

*Copies of this report may be obtained from:-*

*External Relations Department  
HEFCE  
Northavon House  
Coldharbour Lane  
Bristol BS6 1QD*



*Maurice B Line is an Information & Library Consultant, 10 Blackthorn Lane, Burn Bridge, Harrogate, HG3 1NZ*

This is the first major review of academic libraries since the report of the UGC Committee on Libraries (Parry Report) was published in 1967. Over the intervening 26 years, but particularly in the last five, higher education has been transformed. We have many more universities with the last year's change in title of polytechnics, a number of other institutions of higher education are able to award degrees, and the oversight and funding of higher education are unified under the various funding councils (one for each part of the UK). Above all, the number of students has enormously increased.

While all this has been going on, the output of books and journals has continued to grow, and their prices have grown faster than the RPI; and the percentage spent by institutions (themselves pressed for money) on their libraries has shrunk. The number of loans has kept pace with student numbers in the past five years, but everything else in libraries - volumes acquired, staff numbers, reader seats, interlibrary loans and so on - has fallen well behind. Parent institutions have been issuing strategic plans, quality of teaching is being assessed, and institutional performance indicators are being produced: but in none of these developments has much attention been paid to libraries. Their central importance is almost universally recognized in principle, but practice tells a different story. It would not have been altogether surprising if academic librarians had succumbed to mass paranoia.

There has been one other major development, which underlies the thinking of much of the report. Information technology has seen spectacular advances, which have helped libraries not only to continue to operate but to actually improve some services, but which have also obliged them to incur new costs. IT is also forcing a rethink of the concept of "library", as the report indicates: "the emphasis will shift away from the library as a place ... and towards the information to which it can provide access."

So this report is a major event. The Libraries Review Group (hereinafter referred to as "Follett", after its chairman, Sir Brian Follett, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Warwick) has done a thorough and impressive job in a short time. Three sub-groups were set up, on Funding and Resources, Management of Libraries, and Information Technology; the working papers of the last, which make excellent reading in themselves, have already been issued as a separate package<sup>1</sup>. In addition, a survey of facts, figures and attitudes was commissioned from LISU (much of this was evidently

unused, partly because it was scarcely usable), and a study of staff management from the John Fielden Consultancy; both of these will be made available separately.

Librarians were well represented on the main group and the three sub-groups - as were vice-chancellors and principals, so the report can hardly be ignored. Without being dirigiste - the principle that every institution must determine how it spends its money is strongly affirmed - the report puts its message over with considerable force. It is aimed at the funding councils and individual institutions; it is accepted that no additional money will be made directly available from the government. If institutions are to have decent library facilities they must, Follett says, provide the resources for them out of their block grants, aided by some substantial short-term injections of money from the funding councils in certain areas: more space (£50 million, in addition to £140 million provided by institutions), local co-operation (£500,000), and IT (£15 million for various projects), most of these sums over three years. In addition, up to £10 million should be allocated to support for humanities collections.

### Provision for Students

The problem of space, for readers rather than stock, is especially acute. It may be alleviated by increased opening hours and by conversion of book to reading space by use of high density storage, but this will not be enough. The extra money recommended would be for "projects to build, remodel or adapt space". Much better co-operation between lecturers and libraries is needed; we have heard that before, but the "single database of reading list material for each course" proposed, which would "benefit teachers, students, librarians, publishers and booksellers", has perhaps a better chance of working than the habitual entreaties and accusations.

Collaboration between libraries in support of teaching, which is already being tried in several cities, is commended; the report talks of successful arrangements, but with any co-operative scheme the cost and effort can outweigh any benefits in terms of shared access to reading space or stock, even with libraries in close proximity, and I have yet to see a careful cost-benefit analysis of any scheme. Is it too much to

hope that cost-benefit analyses of this kind will be mandatory if the recommendation of funds for pump-priming for such schemes is accepted?

I believe the problems of students, other than reading space, have not received nearly enough attention. Little is made of the huge shift that has occurred in expenditure from monographs to journals in university libraries. This must have penalized students. It is also irrational, because journal articles are far easier to get quickly from elsewhere than are books. In the light of surveys that consistently show that students cannot get hold of much more than about 60% of what they need, recommendations that libraries should co-operate more and that each institution should review whether it is spending enough on its short loan collection seem a very feeble response. I do not think either that enough is made of the trend to self-directed learning, which is unstoppable, both because of the cost of teaching staff and because it can be, if well designed, more effective.

### Research Provision

Although Follett's initial primary concern was with library provision for taught students, at least as much of the report is devoted to research provision, recognizing that it overlaps substantially with student provision - this creates a problem when institutions are obliged to be more explicit about provision for each of the two broad areas. Research provision is much more uneven than student provision, for historical and other reasons. Selective research funding has exacerbated the problems.

The remedies proposed by Follett are to encourage the development of networks of research libraries at national or regional level, drawing on the strengths of particular libraries or groups of libraries. Since this cannot be forced on any institution, if the basic principle of institutional autonomy is to remain intact, numerous bodies such as the British Academy, the British Library, CVCP etc. will have to discuss how it is to be achieved. This may prove to be a slow process. In addition, the funding councils should invite bids from institutions for special funding to support specialized collections which are widely used by other humanities researchers; and the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge should continue to receive their special grants of £1.1

million a year to help with the cataloguing, storage and access costs resulting from legal deposit, on condition that they are accessible to researchers from elsewhere in the UK (whether they should continue to benefit - if that is the word for such a huge and costly burden - from legal deposit is a question that is wisely left unasked).

The main proposal "would include integrated acquisitions and disposals policies". Such planned schemes have been proposed, and tried, many times before. Virtually all of them fizzled out for logistic and economic reasons, most of them at an early stage. Only a very few, nearly if not all in the US, have lasted any length of time. Some concentration of specialized resources occurs anyway, and the *additional* benefits of planning remain to be proved. The only benefits would be for users visiting the collections for consultation; for remote document access planning is unnecessary, since the catalogues of the collections are becoming accessible electronically. There might be another supposed benefit if the *total* resources in the UK were thereby enlarged, but then one would have to ask what the benefits are of acquiring large amounts of material in anticipation of demand rather than in response to it. The British Library already does this, and makes its foreign books available to other libraries. The very low demand for this service, and the ever-improving access to collections in Europe and North America, make enlargement of resources a dubious use of money.

### Use of Information Technology

Another recommendation is for £3 million funding for electronic document delivery consortia, subject-based, metropolitan and regional. While there may be some point in subject-based consortia, it is hard to see any at all in metropolitan or regional, since distance is more or less irrelevant with electronic systems; and anyway it is important to use the national document supply services of the British Library to the full if they are to be maintained. It is surely vital that they are, since the BL bears an enormous burden of supply that would otherwise fall largely on hard-pressed academic libraries, supplies many items that are held nowhere else in the UK, and because of its collecting policy makes

local decisions about marginal acquisitions much easier.

The above is one of a number of recommendations relating to IT (which account for 18 of the 45 recommendations). The IT chapter is of particular importance and interest. It contains no fewer than seven proposals for special funding, as well as two for "support" and several for local and national initiatives. Activities urged include the development of navigational tools, monitoring of the development of communication standards, the creation of digitised customised book texts, the development of the CURL database as a national OPAC service, a national training programme for library staff, assessment of whether a national retroconversion programme would be justified, and specification of a Management Information System. This is a pretty comprehensive list; if these proposals are acted upon, libraries will be in a much stronger position to take advantage of the possibilities offered by IT.

The problems presented by copyright are addressed. Copyright owners and higher education institutions have conflicting interests, but "publishers should be prepared to be receptive to the requirements and interests of higher education if the latter can offer effective policing of licensing agreements and co-operation in work on technical monitoring controls." A pilot initiative is recommended.

### Serials

It will be apparent that much of the report has implications for serials. The cost of journals is touched upon more than once; and here hope emphatically triumphs over experience. The CVCP, we are told, should seek "co-operation with the Association of American Universities and other appropriate US bodies, to find practical and effective ways of influencing the periodicals market in a manner which both provides value for money for periodical purchasers and a fair return for publishers". One can only wish the CVCP the best of luck.

Two proposals for special funding in the IT chapter relating specifically to serials were not mentioned above. These are a large scale subject-based demonstrator project for the conversion of out-of-copyright back runs of journals, and the

development of a limited number of refereed electronic journals.

There is one very misleading statement, scarcely less excusable because it has appeared elsewhere. It is true that "the number of periodicals cited in *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory* rose from 62,000 in 1980 to 126,000 in 1991-92", but over 30,000 of the increase is due simply to Ulrich's having merged its directory of irregular titles into the 1988-89 volume. Alarm bells should have rung over an apparent increase of over 50% (from 71,000 to 108,590) between 1987 and 1988.

### Library Management

The funding councils are urged to "request a component dealing specifically with library and related services within the overall strategic planning information which they periodically seek from institutions". Libraries should be viewed in the context of an integrated information strategy, which should consider what form of collaboration is best between the library and computing and audio-visual services.

Although each institution should decide what it spends on the library, a "coherent and generic set of performance indicators" should be developed, to enable it to assess its attainment of objectives in comparison with other libraries. A suggested framework for PIs is given in an Annex to the report.

Since staff account for over half of current expenditure in most libraries, staff management is recognized to be of great importance. However, its detailed consideration is left to the Fielden report. The recommendation that each institution should review the appropriate balance between expenditure on staff and on other elements is sensible enough, so long as appropriateness is judged against outputs: provided that the library achieves desired outputs cost-effectively, it should not matter what proportion it spends on staff or anything else. As is pointed out, increased emphasis on access rather than holding is likely to require more expenditure on staff; so also are factors not pointed out, such as the number of sites to be staffed, opening hours (which we are told could be increased), and involvement in student-directed learning.

### Omissions and Errors

There are one or two rather puzzling omissions in the report. No mention is made of income generation, perhaps deliberately, for there is an underlying assumption that nearly all access to all libraries should be free to all UK staff and students. Nor is anything said about such trends as "outsourcing" library operations and limited term contracts, trends that might improve efficiency in some areas but could equally play havoc with staff cohesion and motivation; Perhaps the Fielden report will deal with these. Disposal of stock is mentioned, but not discussed either as a physical necessity or as a desirable activity in many libraries.

There is evidence of some haste, and also some carelessness, in the production of the report, apart from the statement about the growth of serial titles. The text refers to four graphs (figures 13-16) that are not there, and another reference to a figure is wrong. Data of expenditure per capita are given, but we are not told if the "capita" are students, staff plus academic students or what. There are overlaps between different chapters, which have not been fully welded into a coherent document.

It is incidentally a pity that the opportunity was not taken in an authoritative report to kill off the term "interlibrary lending" as a blanket term for documents obtained from remote sources; most remotely obtained documents are not loans but copies, and some are not supplied by libraries.

### Conclusion

Not much happened to academic libraries as a result of the Parry report; librarians kept quoting the (qualified) recommendation that institutions should spend 6% of their money on the library, but as noted earlier the percentage has actually declined. Let us hope that the Follett report results in at least more serious attention being given to libraries, followed by some positive action. It will not be the fault of Follett and his team if it doesn't.

### Reference

1. Libraries and IT: working papers of the Information Technology Sub-Committee of the HEFC's Libraries Review. Bath University: UK Office for Library Networking, 1993.